The Gift of a Wise Heart
October 23, 2011

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Psalm 90:1–12
Matthew 22:34–40
Deuteronomy 34:1–12

"Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart."
Psalm 90:12 (NRSV)

"Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.

"Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history: therefore we must be saved by faith.

"Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love."

Reinhold Niebuhr

Startle us, O God, with your truth and your love for the world and everything in it. Open our minds and our hearts to the word you have for us today, and give us faith to trust you with our lives; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

On April 3, 1968, the evening before he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. preached a sermon at the Mason Temple, Church of God in Christ, Memphis, Tennessee. It's a great sermon, typical Martin Luther King, eloquent, grounded in scripture and history, quoting from Greek philosophers and contemporary scholarship, and citing the long struggle for freedom by oppressed people everywhere in the world. He spoke about the African-American experience, from slavery to Jim Crow laws to the civil rights movement. He spoke about the striking Memphis sanitation workers he had come to support. He spoke about a close call he had a few years earlier when a disturbed woman stabbed him at a book signing. The blade was so close to his aorta that the emergency room doctor told him if he sneezed he would die. He read a letter he received from a ninth grade student at White Plains High School while he was in the hospital.

“Dr. King: While it should not matter, I would like to mention that I’m a white girl. I read in the paper of your misfortune, and of your suffering. And I read that if you had sneezed, you would have died. And I’m simply writing to say that I’m so happy that you didn’t sneeze.”

At the very end of the sermon, King said something haunting. He explained that when he arrived in Memphis, he received several death threats, and he said, “Well, I don’t know what will happen now. We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn’t matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. . . .

“Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I’m not concerned about that now. I just want to do God’s will. And he’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over. And I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land.”

Martin Luther King Jr.’s allusion to being to the mountain and seeing over to the Promised Land is based on a singular incident in the story of God’s people. It’s in the thirty-fourth chapter of the book of Deuteronomy, and it is the lectionary reading for this Sunday. I tried all week to think of a reason to avoid that text, because frankly, it cuts a little close, with all that business about an old man seeing the Promised Land and not getting there. It’s Moses’ “exit interview,” and he’s not getting a retirement celebration, no throwing out the first ball at a Cubs game, no concert and reception, just a vision of the future. And the more I tried to think of a reason to avoid this text, the more I was drawn to it. I concluded that surely there must be other preachers in the thousands of churches throughout the world who are thinking personally about the meaning of this story through the lens of their own approaching retirement, so here goes.

Moses has led his people for a long time: forty years of wandering through the wilderness after the harrowing experience of convincing Pharaoh to release them from slavery in Egypt and then making their way through the waters of the Red Sea. Four decades they wandered up and down the Sinai Peninsula, Moses leading all that way—inspiring, pushing, prodding, scolding—and now they have arrived at their destination, the Promised Land. God takes Moses to the peak of the highest point in the region, Mt. Nebo, and allows Moses to look over and see the land, all of it, the goal of his life, toward which he has been walking for four decades. And then God tells Moses, “You can see it, but you’re not going over there yourself.”

It is not clear how much history is condensed here. But Moses ultimately dies, at the age of 120, which is not bad at all, his “sight unimpaired and his vigor unabated.” Joshua takes over and leads the people into the Promised Land.

I have no delusions of grandeur. I am not Moses. But I confess that at least once a day I have a Mt. Nebo experience: a very modest, tiny one to be sure. At least once a day, I walk to the back of the church offices and look out the second-floor window to follow the progress on the construction site where our new building is now emerging. It's not the Promised Land, but it is a project we've been working on and looking forward to for almost a decade. When it is completed, I will have been retired for months. A new pastor will be here, or be very close to being here. I want you to know that the timing is intentional. There is a new adventure ahead, an exciting new chapter in the history of this church. And it is time for new leadership. But standing at the window watching this week as the steel girders were set in place by the huge crane and fastened together with steel cross beams, it did occur to me that there is personal meaning in this text this time.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who taught theology at Union Seminary in New York and was a very influential voice in our nation in the middle of the twentieth century, has influenced my thinking a lot over the years. He wrote, and I now understand personally,

> Nothing worth doing can be accomplished in a lifetime: therefore we must be saved by hope.
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> Nothing true or beautiful or good makes sense in any immediate context of history: therefore we must be saved by faith.
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> Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love.

Important work, by its very nature, is always multigenerational. The great cathedrals of Europe took hundreds of years to build and many are still not complete. Nations are the work of founders and the generations who follow. Corporations, hospitals, universities, families are multigenerational projects. A church is a multigenerational project—certainly this one is. Important work is never done. And coming to terms with that is about as important a life task as there is.

Psalm 90, which the lectionary assigns to accompany the Mt. Nebo story, is called "A Prayer of Moses, the man of God." Tradition has it that it is the prayer Moses prayed while standing on Mt. Nebo, looking over at the land he would not personally enter.

> Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth . . . from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

And then the prayer turns into a lament, a complaint:

> You turn us back into dust. . . . You sweep them away: they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning; in the evening it fades and withers.

That is a very familiar complaint: “Life isn’t fair—and it is way too short.”

Isaac Watts, in his paraphrase of Psalm 90, the favorite hymn “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past,” renders it, “We fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day,” a sentiment Cubs fans understand deeply and profoundly, “dreams dying at opening day” and all that. (I digress.)

The truth Moses confronted on Mt. Nebo and that Psalm 90 articulates as a lament—which, by the way, turns into a comforting affirmation of deep hope in God’s steadfast and everlasting love (“O prosper the work of our hands,” the prayer concludes), the truth in the text, and in Moses’ prayer, is that mortality is part of God’s plan for creation. It is a psalm, someone noted, of our faith’s “trusting realism.” “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,” Moses prayed. Limits come as a condition with the gift of life. “We will all die,” Peter Gomes said, before he died, “before our work is done.” In the meantime, the psalmist urges, be honest and realistic and don’t let one precious day of your life go by without living it fully and thanking God for it.

> Teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart.

That’s trusting realism.

Everybody has to come to terms in some way with aging, that universal human experience of looking in the mirror and asking, “What in the world happened?” Martin Marty said once, “It is a shock every day walking past a mirror and wondering who that old guy is looking back at me.”

Our culture, particularly, has trouble with it. We fight aging ferociously. We spend enormous amounts of money to disguise reality: creams, lotions, pills, electronic treatments, surgery to disguise and deny what is happening. I’m always amused to observe the way television advertising is targeted to whom and what age the audience is. There are a lot of commercials for Ram pickup trucks during NFL games, beauty creams and hair coloring during the soaps, afternoon or evening, and when they know I’m watching, me and my cohort, PBS news, for instance, a virtual nonstop parade of products to address hair loss, blood pressure, weight, dentures, eyesight, and, of course, what the Bible delicately calls “vigor abatement.” I get depressed just watching it.

Now it is a good thing to resist the effects of aging: to exercise more and take care of grooming and whatever else needs a little extra attention and help. It is not a good thing, not a wise thing, the Bible would put it, to deny the reality of aging and mortality.

What are we to do, then?

William Sloane Coffin Jr. lived a long and full life. Army intelligence in World War II, concert pianist, linguist, first-class intellectual, chaplain at Yale, war protestor, nuclear weapons activist. He had a serious stroke and wrote a very wise and helpful book, *Credo.* In the last chapter he reflects on aging and death.

“Look back at your life to see who you were created to be,” he wrote. “Memory, purposely used, is like a running long jump: it takes you back only to launch you forward—senior years are ideally formative years.”

“Death,” Coffin said, “is more friend than foe. Life without death would be interminable, literally. We’d take days to get out of bed, weeks to decide ‘what’s next?’ Students would never graduate, faculty meetings and all kinds of gatherings would go on for months.”

And then, one of the wisest things he, or anyone for that matter, ever said, a truth you do discover with age, “It’s death that brings life, so it can’t be the enemy.”

Coffin wrote, after his stroke, “I’m not withdrawing from the world. I’m present in a different way. I’m more and more attentive to family and friends and nature’s beauty.” How much you miss when you think you’ll live forever.

Life becomes more precious, more beautiful, as you learn about, acknowledge, and come to terms with its limits.

I lived the first part of my life in the middle of the Pennsylvania mountains and never noticed them. Now I watch Penn State football games on the chance and hope that during timeouts the television camera will sweep those same mountains. It’s not my imagination is it, but isn’t autumn more breathtakingly beautiful each passing year; flowers more of a miracle, blue jays and cardinals, finches and \juncos at the feeder more of a gift?

Coffin continued, “Although still outraged by callous behavior, particularly in high places, I feel more often serene, grateful for God’s gift of life. I find myself saying daily to my loving Maker, ‘I can no other answer make than thanks, and thanks and ever thanks.’”

It takes a lifetime to learn that lesson of gratitude, that every day of life is a new gift, given every morning, to be savored, enjoyed, lived, and loved.

One of the blessings of this job is that people teach you that lesson all your life long, even before you are ready to learn it. Years ago, in another congregation in another city, one of my dear friends was diagnosed with a lethal cancer. She and her husband were good friends of ours, not church members. In fact, they were Jewish. After her diagnosis and treatment began, Bobbi went to see her rabbi and she came to see me, to cover all the bases she explained, with a twinkle in her eye. She told me that knowing how serious her situation was, she found herself wanting to get up earlier every morning, embrace every day, wanting not to miss anything, wanting to experience everything fully, every single conversation, every meal, every cup of coffee, every sunset, every encounter with her friends and her husband, her children, her rabbi and Presbyterian minister. I recalled something I had read, copied and mailed it to her, and a year later read at her funeral in her synagogue.

It's from a letter by Abraham Maslow, distinguished psychologist, recuperating at home from a heart attack:

> The confrontation with death—and the reprieve from it—makes everything look so precious, so sacred, so beautiful, that I feel more strongly than ever the impulse to love it, to embrace it, to let myself be overwhelmed by it. My river has never looked so beautiful. . . . Death, and its ever-present possibility, makes love, passionate love, more possible. I wonder if we could love passionately, if ecstasy would be possible at all, if we knew we'd never die. (*Love and Will*, Rollo May)

Teach us, O Lord, to number our days.

Teach us, O Lord, not to put off our dreams and hopes. Teach us to live each day as the gift from you that it is.

Teach us to live each day with eyes open to the beauty of your world, ears open to music, the voices of loved ones, the cries of infants, the cries of people who need us.

Teach us, O Lord, to tell the people we love how much we love them.

And teach us, finally, the depth and length and breadth of your love we have seen in Jesus Christ our Lord, that love from which nothing will ever separate us.

O Lord, prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands.

Amen.